

Just One Of Those Things by EmeraldTulip

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Future Fic, Gen, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Secret Relationship, Tags Are Hard, also a little bit of el struggling with her own identity, also max is totally bi but she's happy with lucas and doesn't know how to explain it, because she's el but she's also jane now so that's super hard to navigate especially in high school, mike/will is established but it's also kind of a secret everyone knows and pretends they don't, the party basically figuring out what they already knew

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler (past relationship), Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair (background), Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

It's always just been one of those things they don't talk about.

Just One Of Those Things

Author's Note:

sup. i give thee: byeler with a side of lumax, bi max, "foster" siblings will and el, and confronting all of their own secrets. i've always thought that it might be interesting to explore the other characters' thoughts about will and mike's relationship, as well as how el/jane is going to develop as a person. it takes place when they're seniors in high school, so they're 17/18 years old. i can't tell if i love this or hate this, but i guess that's up to you guys to decide! i hope you all enjoy!

There's an unspoken rule in the Party, a specific dynamic they never address: *we don't talk about... that.*

They don't talk about the particular closeness between the two of them. They don't mention how Will strives to live up to whatever expectations he thinks Mike has for him, how Mike does everything from writing more campaigns to reenacting *Star Wars* for the simple reason of needing to impress him. They don't talk about how, in the year after the monster, Will always reaches for Mike first and Mike is always there to take his hand.

And even later, after everything, they don't talk about the way Will has never said anything about or even *looked* at girls. Or the handful of phone calls to Will's house Mike has answered or vice-versa. They don't talk about Mike and El's amicable (albeit awkward) breakup in tenth grade, or the unsettling three weeks about a month later when Will all but stays holed up in the library with Jennifer Hayes and Christopher Thomas as he flinches away from any of his friends (but especially Mike).

They don't talk about the way Mike's gaze lingers on him, always. They don't talk about the movies the rest of the Party remain uninvited to, their classmates' parties where the two of them will disappear for an hour or so and reappear later on only to look suspiciously ruffled, the way Mike hates sharing his clothes but Will

always has a too-big sweater on anyway. They don't talk about any of it.

Sometimes, it's easy to pretend—forget, even—that it doesn't happen at all.

Max throws a wrench in the plans. *The Rule* has been in place since, what, sixth grade? Seventh? Probably even earlier. Lucas can't remember. But he knows that it was before she had gotten there. It's not really her fault she doesn't know.

Then again, it really should be obvious enough at this point—it's been four years.

The only reason Lucas is thinking this, anyway, is because he's stopped dead in the middle of the street, frozen, staring at his girlfriend.

"Well?" she prompts, and Lucas has to close his eyes for a moment to think about what has lead up to this moment.

They—the Party—had all gone to Jared Thompson's house for some big Senior year blowout. Dustin, Max, and El had all staunchly voted yes to going. Lucas and Will said no, and then the eyes had turned to Mike. He had sighed, obviously thinking hard, before giving Will (*specifically*) a meaningful glance and muttering, "Fine."

The three had cheered as Lucas complained and Will rolled his eyes, letting Mike sling an arm over his shoulders. No one noticed.

Then the party happened, and Max—avoiding alcohol like the plague even as Lucas stole Dustin's drink and took a few sips (he wasn't there by choice, he was going to enjoy himself, dammit!)—had eventually gotten tired, asking Lucas to walk her home. Seeing an out, he had agreed.

And then she'd asked: "So, what do you think the deal is between Mike and Will?"

And he had stopped, and now he's here.

“What?” he manages to choke out.

Max rolls her eyes. “Lucas, come on. Seriously, is this some sort of weird game we all play? Michael and William. Wheeler and Byers. Paladin and Cleric. Nerd and nerd. Are we just going to pretend that we don’t see it happening in front of our eyes?”

He shakes his head, suddenly feeling dizzy. He’s never talked about it before, to *anyone*. He’d almost forgotten—but he remembers now, and it’s a little... much. “Max, this isn’t...”

She picks up the sentence where he’s trailed off. “What I think it is?” she asks. “Because I’m pretty sure it is. I didn’t see them for the last twenty minutes we were there, and *apparently* Jared’s back door was open. Three guesses as to who left, probably to go make out?”

“No,” he replies quickly, voice not cooperating. He coughs. “Also, gross. But... but, no, I. I was going to say that this isn’t California. It’s... it’s just... *Hawkins*.” The unspoken *people won’t like it here* doesn’t remain unheard.

She shoves her hands into her pockets. “Yeah. I know.” She swallows, hard, and Lucas can see the movement of her shoulders as they tense. Like there’s something else she wants to say. Instead of saying it, she shakes her head. “Lucas, I’ve been playing along with this whole thing since *eighth grade*. And, you know, that first real party we ever went to? Darby Templeton’s, in eleventh grade, last year? Like, a year after Mike and El broke up.”

“Yeah.”

“I played along then, too,” she admits. “I saw them, just for a second, sneaking off. Like always, now. But Will kissed Mike then, and just like I’m sure it had happened before, I’m sure that it’s still happening now.” She shakes her head. “I can’t just *pretend* it isn’t happening anymore. Because it *is*, and I...” She takes a breath, wind whipping her hair into her face. “Did you know?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I think so?” He sighs, offering a hand for her to take. She does, and they begin to walk, taking slow steps down the street. “I guess... we just never talked about it. We just... never did.

And they've always been close." He hesitates. "I think I knew. But I convinced myself I didn't."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Lucas realized helplessly. "It's just... one of those things, I think." He glances at her, guilty eyes darting away quickly. "Is that bad?"

She offers a small, sad smile. "I don't think so, no."

El earns her reputation—or, rather, Jane Hopper does. Wearing the mask that is Jane, El becomes an enigma at Hawkins High—quiet to the point she's nearly silent, a math whiz, intense stare, curly hair sheared short with an odd array of clothes. It helps that she's the daughter of the hot-tempered Chief of Police and the foster sister of The Boy Who Came Back To Life. She's mysterious, and apparently boys "dig that" while girls "want to be that" (says Dustin, anyway). She couldn't care less about boys, and she doesn't think a girl could become any more beautiful by mimicking her, but she's read enough books to know that yes, people do like mysteries.

Not to mention, karma really does seem to kick back around her. At least, that's what the student body believes. For instance, on her first day of school, Troy had flicked a slur-filled note at the back of Will Byers' head. Seconds after it had been unfolded, read, and crumpled again, the boy pulling in on himself, Troy had tripped over nothing. He lost three teeth; Dustin had fired a small comment, looking vindicated; Jane had appeared very pleased.

In all honesty: Jane *was* pleased—still is, three years later. Scarily so; enough that her vision turns a satisfying red for just a moment. El feels a little remorseful, using her powers to hurt some kid, but then she remembers everything Troy has done and her resolve is set. She might not like the things she does as Jane a lot of the time, but she finds nothing wrong about this.

The other thing she is known for is for, well, *knowing*. People are always open books to her, with the exception of a few.

“Don’t even think about stealing that,” Jane says softly to the kid she spies hovering around Mr. B’s room. He whips around, eyes wide, and sprints away from the expensive-looking, half-repaired watch on the teacher’s desk.

“Sorry, Jane,” he mutters in return before he’s gone, and Jane just nods and smiles tightly, dark eyes following him. Jane files the interaction in her memory, but she already has his face and name blocked out—she can claim deniability if necessary.

She relaxes her stance as soon as he’s gone, El taking over from Jane, shouldering her bag and making her way down the hall. She’s searching for Will, so they can go home together—though her dad and Joyce aren’t “dating”, they live in the same house, so Will and Jonathan are basically her brothers now. It makes it hard, hearing all of Jonathan’s thoughts when he comes back from college, hearing Joyce’s and Dad’s all the time, and then only getting painful feedback from Will.

If only Will’s mind was like that boy’s, she thinks idly. *Pliant, but not weak. Though not foolish like him.* Because there are things she doesn’t understand about Will, about Mike, about society, about the world. Things she might be able to decode if only she could see him like she sees everyone else. Questions she could have answered.

Question one would probably be: *Why are you still sad?* Because Will is still so oppressively miserable that it follows him like a storm cloud, so prominent she couldn’t miss it if she tried. But things are better now, so why?

Question two would certainly be: *It’s not your fault. You know that, right?* And she would ask because Will tries to carry the weight of the world on his small shoulders, because Will blames himself for everything bad that has ever happened to him or someone he cares about. She doesn’t need powers to see that. Will just thinks that bad things happen to him for a reason, that he has brought these evils upon himself, and El wants to make him see that it just doesn’t work like that.

Question three would simply be: *You love him, so why do you hide?* It had hurt for a while when Mike had, *what’s the term...* “broken up”

with her. Will helped her understand that all Mike meant was that they weren't right for each other "romantically" (which is apparently different from "platonically", which is apparently the one El herself likes). And El can't read Will but she can read Mike as well as anyone else—perhaps better—and she knows everything: she knows that Mike loves Nancy though he says he doesn't, he admires Steve though he says he doesn't, he thinks Jonathan is a little too "cloud-in-front-of-the-sun-on-a-previously-nice-day", whatever that means, though he says he doesn't. She knows that even though she is Mike's favorite person, Will is Mike's *Favorite Person*, though Mike says he doesn't have favorites. Basically, Mike says a lot of things that aren't true. But El now knows the difference between lies, white lies, and not knowing the truth, so she'll let it slide.

And she will never know the way she knows about other people, but Will's heart is worn on his arm—no, sleeve, that's right. His emotions are clear. El knows what it means, when Will's face lights up as Mike wraps him into a hug.

And, moreover, the brightest, loudest thought from Mike is a mixture of love and fear. It's something El has always known about but hadn't been able to interpret when she first saw it. But she gets it now: Mike loves Will, in a way that's *romantic* and not solely *platonic* like it is with the rest of the Party, and it scares him.

She doesn't know *why*.

The problem is that no one addresses this, no one seems to relate to her thoughts, so she is left to wonder if this is just another one of those countless things she'll never understand.

Dustin likes to think that he has a special sort of intuition—not a power, like El has and whatever Will has developed, but a... skill. The kind that has gotten him in trouble before, sure, but is a big achievement nonetheless. For instance: Dart. Yeah, Dart had turned out to be a dangerous inter-dimensional baby Demogorgon, but befriending it had helped the Party escape the tunnels when El closed the gate.

So. Intuition not terrible.

But his intuition screams *DANGER DANGER DANGER* around El, around Will. He doesn't think they'll hurt him, any of them—because of course they wouldn't—but he swears he can feel an undercurrent of energy when they step into a room. It's in the way things shake but don't fall when El is angry, the way shadows seem to bend to Will when he's afraid.

And he gets something from Mike, too. Less in a physical sense—there are no tremors, no flashes of light or darkness or color when something goes wrong. But there's something in Mike's gaze that warns people to not get too close. If Dustin's not-superpower is his intuition, Mike's is his disconcerting glares.

Dustin notices it a lot at school, when bullies—fewer than there had been in the past, fortunately—whisper behind Will's back. Or when people snicker when he stutters through answering a question on a bad day. Even at home, when the rest of the Party send questioning looks at them when Will falls asleep on Mike's shoulder during a movie night and all Mike does is run a hand through his hair.

The look tells them, *no*. Forceful enough that people just tend to look away before his glare intensifies. And Dustin wonders what it is about Will that has Mike doing that. What it is that could make Mike do anything for him. Wonders how long they've loved each other.

But Mike says *no*, and it becomes one of those things Dustin tries not to think about.

It's one of those things Will talks about a lot. In whispers, usually, sometimes over a radio he has control over or muttered into the ceiling as they sprawl out in his bedroom or sometimes even spoken about between kisses. And Mike listens to him, replies to him, *understands*.

It's why Will loves him.

They don't talk about the others. It seems too *wrong*. But they talk about everything else—their feelings, their future (singular), their fears. How much they love each other.

They don't talk about the fact that they haven't let a single person know about them yet, despite the fact that it's been two years. The fact that their friends might whisper things but never say anything substantial out loud. They don't talk about the fact that Mike sometimes thinks about how he really did have feelings for El, even though it's long gone. They don't talk about the three weeks Will had spent hiding away with Jen and Christopher after he confessed, terrified and confused; the three weeks that they had spent apart before they snapped back together like a rubber band. *Those* are just... some of those things they don't talk about.

"I love you," Mike mutters sleepily as he clambers into the bed beside Will. It's the same bed he's had since he was a kid and it's much too small for two people, but they make it work. It's Saturday night and the door is locked, El is at the arcade with Max and Lucas, Dustin is away, Jonathan is at college, his mom and Hopper are sleeping, and Mike will make his escape in the morning through the window.

Will wraps his arms around Mike's torso and pulls him closer, away from the edge. He presses a kiss to his mouth. "Mm. Love you, too."

And it's one of those things they can talk about.

Author's Note:

comments and kudos are, as always, appreciated.

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